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ABSTRACT

A growing movement to ground school curriculum in locally relevant material--often called place-based education--is capturing the attention of many rural educators. Some see this approach as a way to address the decline of rural communities, including the outmigration of youth, by preparing students to live productive and fully engaged lives in their home communities. However, this view of education may conflict with the national movement to adopt academic standards and accountability measures. This digest compares and contrasts the underlying commitments and practical implications of standards-based versus place-based education reforms. A review of the accountability movement of the past 10 years discusses its focus on training competitive workers for jobs in the global economy, the pattern most states followed in developing academic standards, and the creation of uniformity in school programs through the mechanisms of common educational standards and mandatory testing. In contrast, place-based pedagogy focuses on preparing citizens, local control, broad integrated curriculum, and practical problem solving. Ways in which educators can bridge the gap between the two approaches are discussed, and examples of successful place-based education are offered. (Contains 13 references.) (SV)

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"World-Class Standards" and Local Pedagogies: Can We Do Both?

Thomas J. Gibbs and Aimee Howley

A growing movement to ground school curriculum and instruction in local geography, ecology, culture, economy, and history—often referred to as *place-based* education—is capturing the attention of many rural educators across the country. Some see this approach as a way to address the decline of many rural communities, including the out-migration of young people, by preparing students to live productive and fully engaged lives in their home communities. However, this view of education seems to put its proponents in conflict with the national movement to adopt academic standards and accountability measures. This Digest compares and contrasts the underlying commitments and practical implications of standards-based versus place-based education reform.

The Accountability Movement

Over the past ten years, nearly every state in the United States has introduced a set of accountability standards, often accompanied by mandatory tests of student achievement. State standards aim to represent the common core of knowledge that all citizens ought to possess. The legislators who put forward the standards maintain that these lists of valued educational outcomes enable the public to monitor how well schools perform.

With increasing support from local community members, however, some educators question the value of precisely defined standards. These educators worry that state standards erode local control over education, thereby limiting the important connection between communities and their schools (Rural Challenge, 1999). Moreover, they argue that state standards require schools to adopt curricula and teaching methods that construe learning too narrowly, severing crucial linkages between students' lived experiences and rigorous academic content (see e.g., Eisner, 1995). For these commentators, education is all about making meaning, which necessarily involves intellectual processes of greater sophistication than those typically assessed by state-mandated tests.

Despite these assertions, many policymakers continue to maintain that *all* public schools need to prepare students to become workers in an increasingly complicated global economy. Schools, according to this view, have an obligation to assure that all students master the skills necessary to perform the high-level tasks required in the twenty-first century workplace. From the vantage of these policymakers, state-level standards assure that schools—no matter where they are located—produce graduates who can compete in national and even global markets. Attentiveness to the global marketplace is, in fact, the reason why policymakers heighten the rhetoric about state standards by referring to them as "world-class."

Place-based pedagogy, "world-class" standards—are they mutually exclusive? Or is it possible to balance the requirements of a curriculum focused on global economic competitiveness with educational values rooted in local commitments and practices?

Pedagogy for a Global Economy

During the period following World War II, advances in the technologies of communication and transportation worked together to make the nations of the world more interdependent. Following the breakup of once powerful colonial empires, new countries established governments favorable to international trade (Kniep, 1986). As a result, various nongovernment groups (e.g., manufacturing and media corporations and volunteer organizations) began to assume some of the diplomatic functions previously reserved for governments. In powerful countries like the United States, the imperatives of the global marketplace increasingly came to influence thinking about how to prepare the nation and its citizens for the complex demands of an interdependent, yet increasingly competitive economy (Rosenau, 1983). As had been the case in the past, policymakers saw schools as the logical vehicle for purveying this national agenda.

Among the first to respond to this agenda were organizations representing the concerns of professional educators. As early as 1979 the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) introduced revised curricular guidelines directed toward preparing students for jobs in a global economy. Efforts along these lines intensified as reports such as *A Nation At Risk* brought questions about the quality of the nation's schools to the headlines of popular news media. In response to charges that schools were not adequately preparing competitive workers, states began to enact accountability legislation.

Although states acted independently, their approach followed a common pattern. Committees of legislators, business people, and educators convened to discuss what students, upon graduation from high school, ought to know and be able to do. Using graduation standards as the new benchmarks, these committees developed education outcomes for children at all developmental levels. With outcomes in place, state education agencies then developed or adopted, and ultimately mandated, competency tests measuring students' knowledge and skills. These tests provided the basis for gauging the success of school districts, local schools, classroom teachers, and individual students.

The effect of accountability legislation has been to create—through the mechanisms of common educational standards and competency-based testing—uniformity in the school programs that students experience (Ohanian, 1999). In an effort to comply with accountability legislation, schools and districts align their curricula with state-adopted standards or with the published objectives of competency tests. Some observers have found that curriculum alignment tends to narrow the focus of academic programs and to reinforce traditional methods of direct instruction, particularly in low-income districts (Firestone, Camilli, Yurecko, Monfils, & Mayrowetz, 2000).

Pedagogy for Local Citizenship

Although advocates of place-based pedagogy sometimes challenge tightly focused education standards, they do not oppose a chief aim of the standards movement: providing a high quality education for all students. Arguing that education ought to be responsive to local needs, these educators typically argue that one set of standards cannot be used universally to guide education practice. This position is succinctly expressed in the policy statement of the Rural School and Community Trust:

> . . . strong local communities are the best habitat for excellence in education. From our perspective, every community is a richly detailed place able to provide a laboratory for learning, children are young citizens whose work in school should serve to improve their

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community, and education is the responsibility of the whole community, not only of professional educators. (2000, p. 1)

According to advocates of place-based pedagogy, local schools should be free to design and offer curricula that reflect and enhance the lifeways of the children they serve. By connecting academic content to the real-world experiences of students, schools increase the chances that all children will derive meaning from their studies. The goal is not to limit students to a small core of knowledge, but instead to root a broadly focused curriculum in the day-to-day lives of a community's children.

Construed in this way, place-based pedagogy draws upon a progressive tradition in American education that emphasizes authentic learning, integrated curriculum, and practical problemsolving. And supporters of this view are among the most vocal critics of standards-based reform (see e.g., Apple, 1996; Giroux, 1999; Ohanian, 1999).

Easing the Tension Between World-Class Standards and Local Pedagogies

Advocates of place-based education differ markedly from advocates of "world-class" standards in the ways they construe the purposes and methods of education. The chart below shows some of the major differences between the two positions.

Despite important differences between the two approaches, practical circumstances often require educators to bridge the gap. In many states, for example, schools and districts are penalized for failing to comply with standards-based reform (Rural School and Community Trust, 1999). Defenders of local pedagogies often find it necessary to justify their approach by showing how well their curricula match the standards mandated by the state (Null, 2000). Moreover, some educators have demonstrated that, when local communities define education standards for themselves, they develop valued outcomes similar to those specified in state standards (Hoffman & Swidler, 2000).

Even when place-based pedagogies do not explicitly attend to the requirements of adopted standards, they can offer students meaningful and rigorous engagement with academic content. Two model programs illustrate the potential academic focus of locally responsive curricula.

Perhaps the best known approach to place-based education, the Foxfire program, had its origins in Rabun County, Georgia, in the early 1970's. Broadly emphasizing the humanities, Foxfire projects engaged students in the work of *cultural journalism*: interviewing community members to reconstruct history; gathering information about traditional cultural practices; and sharing knowledge about local lifeways through the publication of articles, journals, and books. More recent elaborations of the Foxfire approach combine integrated academic instruction with service learning. The Alabama-based Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools (PACERS), for example, sponsors a variety of curriculum projects focused on community needs: agriculture projects that incorporate science content, school improvement projects that teach concepts in electronics, and journalism projects that promote communication in small, rural enclaves (Starnes, 2000).

The Rural School and Community Trust also sponsors programs that build challenging academic work into locally responsive curricula. One example is the Yampa Valley Legacy Education Initiative, which supports a variety of curriculum projects within a five-district region of Colorado. Interestingly, many of these curriculum projects establish credibility by demonstrating their alignment with Colorado's content standards.

	Aims of Education	Educational Governance	Curriculum
Place-Based Education	Preparing citizens, promoting community interests	Local control	Integrated, practical, broad in scope but restricted in coverage
Standards-Based Education	Preparing workers, promoting national interests	State control	Discipline based, abstract, narrow in scope but comprehensive in coverage

High school students from Yampa Valley were recently involved in a community planning project to assist the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the State Wildlife Commission in determining the best use of a new 400-acre site near the Yampa River. As the basis for their plan, students collected field data and used Global Positioning System software to create area maps. Their investigation involved a study of riverbed erosion, wildlife management, and river ecology.

As these examples suggest, place-based pedagogy *can* establish a practical alliance with mandated standards. But some observers question whether such linkages truly enhance the educational value of local projects. Local educators simply may be doing what is necessary to explain innovative curriculum work to responsible state authorities. In an environment in which school aims are strictly tied to instrumental purposes, such as improving worker productivity or increasing global competitiveness, place-based pedagogy, like other progressive approaches, may not fare well. Where education is construed broadly, however, as a means to connect students to larger purposes—personal development, ethical decision making, committed participation in civic life—progressive approaches such as place-based pedagogy are better able to flourish.

Hopefully ways can be found to meet both compelling needs: to hold schools accountable for providing a high quality education to all students and to find locally sensible ways to provide an education that is supportive of community environmental, economic, and civic needs.

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